“Your faith has made you well.” “Your faith,” Jesus says to the woman.

Faith has considerably more to do with heart than head.

“Belief” is generally just the opposite: more head than heart. Theoretically, at least, belief is what we arrive at after weighing the various alternatives and settling on the one we find most satisfying.

We distill belief into a creed (from Latin “credo” which means, simply, “I believe”), even in those churches that ostensibly do not have creeds.

So, we say, “I believe in God the Father . . .,” and so on. We have decided that these are statements of the truth about God and our selves and our relationship with each other. They help us to state our identity.

At the same time as they help us to identify with each other they also serve to distinguish us from others, however we may label those others. Somewhere I read that as soon as people say “I believe” they begin to erect walls separating themselves from other people who believe differently, who believe in some other religion or explanation of God, of the nature of the world, and certainly from those whose have decided to say, “I do not believe” in this or that religious tenet, or “I do not believe” in anything beyond the physical world.

Wars have been fought, are being fought, over different people’s completion of the sentence, “I believe in \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_” (fill in the blank).

This is a touchy business, to be sure.

You and I are here primarily because we share some basic and essential beliefs. We rightly regard as heroes the women and men who have suffered, even died, to uphold these statements of belief over and against those who would try to impose other systems of belief or non-belief, ones that deny the goodness of God, the power of divine love, the very existence of a reality beyond that which we can apprehend with our eyes and ears.

To be honest, though, we would have to agree that even among us here, as our lists of personal beliefs grow longer and more detailed (granular, in today’s parlance) we would discover some significant and seemingly incompatible beliefs. Some of those pertain specifically to the Christian religion—about the Virgin Mary, say, or the role of the saints, and others to the realm of the social and political, but all, I suspect, shored up by differing interpretations of the basic beliefs we hold in common, about how they ought to be applied in day-to-day life.

It’s pretty obvious that I’m of the opinion that religion, particularly the Christian religion, is a good thing, a force on the balance more positive than negative in the world. At the same time I find myself sympathetic to those who produce ads about “Freedom From Religion” as they point out some of the excesses and abuses that humans have committed in the name of religion.

Well, that was a bit more than I intended to say on the that topic this morning, and I know I’ve left it in a kind of ambiguous state. Because it exists in an ambiguous state.

There are to be sure plenty examples of Jesus saying “believe in me,” “believe in the one who sent me,” “believe in the works I have performed,” but they are not about intellectual assent, nor dogmatism. They have the same focus as the scene in today’s reading from Mark. It is not about intellectual or theological differences, at least as I see it. Even when he tells Jairus, “Do not fear, only believe,” it is better understood from the perspective of his declaration in the healing story within the healing story. The healing he performs on his way to perform a healing.

The woman who has been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years—and there’s nothing theoretical about that—reaches out to touch his cloak, not even the man himself. Her bleeding stops at that moment. Jesus—hyper-aware of himself and his surroundings, immediately knows that something has happened. The woman tells him what’s she’s done and what happened as a result, and Jesus says, “Your faith has made you well.” He tells her nothing about what she should believe. He tells her to go in peace. He doesn’t need to tell her to believe or to set aside her fear. She’s already done that. He holds up the woman without pomp or grand gesture as a model. He points to her faith.

These are stories of God’s power and loving will, but the spotlight in this incident is on the faith of the woman who stretches out her hand. And on Jairus, the man’s whose daughter is presumed dead before Jesus can get to her. In the second story, the faith of those who say he shouldn’t bother going any farther is not as strong as the woman’s. But in this case he effects the healing in order to help them deepen and strengthen their faith. So part of the message here is, “Have faith, and when it’s difficult for you to keep the faith, I will help you even with that.”

This faith, which I often prefer to call profound trust, is a necessary component of healing. It does not exist in a vacuum, however, and some religious practitioners have misinterpreted it, using it to blame the sufferer for not being healed. How many people have suffered doubly by holding this belief (in the sense I used that word earlier)? They suffer from the original malady and then the guilt and depression over a presumed lack of faith.

Paul wrote that without love even faith is empty. Jesus tells some of those he has healed to go and show themselves to the priest. In other words, there are other parts of the healing amalgam. These days we must include proper medical treatment in that mixture.

What better example can we at Epiphany have than our own Sheila Wilson who just donated a kidney to Tyler, a friend whom she hadn’t seen for years? That sacrifice demonstrates trust and faith in our Lord and in God-inspired science.

We also know that sometimes that an injury or disease is simply too great for healing to be accomplished in our world as it is at a given moment. That does not signify lack of faith or trust, but merely the mysterious way things are sometimes. We lack the ability to explain them.

We who hold our Christian faith believe (and I use the word intentionally, as an expression of heartfelt faith) that there is a reality beyond that which we can capture by sight or sound or smell. There is life greater than this merely physical one. And we are infused with that eternal life even now. We are in it, and it lives in us, right now.

We are called to know, as those characters in the reading from Mark, that we are upheld by a healing love that transcends all else, including the trials of this life, all our fears, and even death itself. It is the love and grace of God.

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